



## CHANGING FOCUSES: HIGHLIGHTING, FORGETTING, REASSESSING

Knowledge, personal preferences, fads, and trends are never static and fixed, but are constantly changing. Throughout the ages, they have found expression in collecting practices.

The tastes and interests of individual collectors have always been reflected in the focuses of their collections. One example is the large number of corals that we know were part of the collection of the Munich *Kunstammer* of Duke Albrecht V in the sixteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Combining the three natural kingdoms of animals, plants, and minerals, these corals were considered valuable *curiosa*.<sup>2</sup> The Dresden *Kunstammer* of Elector Augustus of Saxony, founded at roughly the same time, is famous for its many tools.<sup>3</sup> Under the Great Elector, numerous *asiatica* were added to the Berlin collection in order to assemble a body of non-European holdings.<sup>4</sup> Under Friedrich III, the goal was to build a large encyclopaedic collection, and for this purpose an order was issued in 1689 to transfer the artworks and *naturalia* dispersed across the ruler's properties to the *Kunstammer* in Berlin [● 1685/1688].<sup>5</sup> The Soldier King Friedrich Wilhelm I enriched the collection with a dozen wild boars that he had shot himself [■ Antlers]. In 1735 he arranged for a large part of the *naturalia* to be moved to the Royal Prussian Society of Sciences, which was later called the Academy of Sciences [■ Monkey Hand]. Thus each sovereign left his mark on the holdings by ensuring that specific objects and object genres were acquired (or removed).

The directors of the Berlin *Kunstammer* also exerted an influence on the development of its collection and the arrangement and presentation of its holdings. Mining and mint councillor Christoph Ungelter, who was appointed *Kunstammer* administrator in 1688, was particularly committed to expanding the collection,<sup>6</sup> and numerous mineral acquisitions are associated with his name [■ Crystalline Gold].<sup>7</sup> By commissioning exhibition furniture for the *Kunstammer's* rooms in the Apothecary Wing of the Berlin Palace [● 1685/1688], he influenced how the objects were presented, framed, and highlighted.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to examining the interests of influential actors at the *Kunstammer*, we can study travel reports, descriptions, and museum guides to gain insight into the collecting preferences that were conditioned by historical tastes. In contrast to inventories, such textual sources focus on objects that were deemed especially unusual or noteworthy. Because a visit to the collection was directly connected to the person leading the tour, such guides heavily influenced what visitors believed was particularly worth seeing. For example, in the first half of the eighteenth century, objects linked to anecdotes attracted special attention [■ Shattered Die], but these became less important in subsequent years. From the nineteenth century on, we find a new appreciation of objects associated with the ruling dynasty, which were now considered “patriotic antiquities” [● Around 1855].

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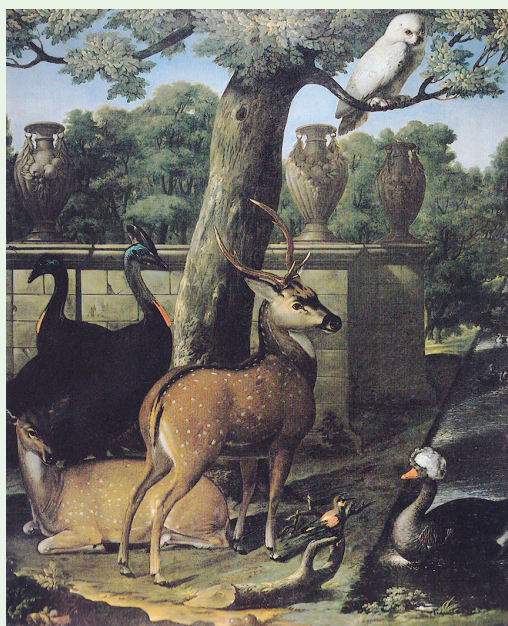
## 1. Amber, “Alte Cabinet Sammlung”, Museum für Naturkunde Berlin

Raw unpolished amber, also known as “Prussian gold”,<sup>9</sup> was an attraction for many visitors to the Berlin Kunstkammer, particularly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Italian traveller Friar Alessandro Bichi was one of them. In his 1696 travel report, Bichi mentions only two objects from the Cabinet of Naturalia: twin pieces of amber weighing up to 30 pounds each. “So far”, Bichi writes, “no heavier specimens have been found by the amber hunters on the Baltic coast of the Duchy of Prussia, which belongs to the elector.”<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Friedrich Wilhelm I, amber remained a focus of the Cabinet of Naturalia in the eighteenth century, when most of the other objects were transferred to the Academy of Sciences.<sup>11</sup> Today, it is no longer possible to determine with any certainty whether the piece depicted here was actually one of the objects in the Kunstkammer [■ Monkey Hand]. DS



## 2. Willem Frederik van Royen, *The Menagerie of Friedrich III, 1697*, Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg

The early modern inventories and descriptions of the Berlin Kunstkammer’s collection refer to various animalia and vegetabilia that were perceived as exotic. These initially belonged to the “living” collection of the court and later found their way into the Kunstkammer as specimens. Mention is made, for example, of a number of palm fruits that had “grown to maturity in Berlin”.<sup>12</sup> In addition to a parrot that had died in captivity, the collection contained a specimen of a cassowary<sup>13</sup> that had “walked freely about the palace grounds in Berlin and Potsdam for several years and [had] had fun with the dogs”.<sup>14</sup> It is likely that this cassowary is depicted in the painting of Friedrich III’s menagerie, made in 1697.<sup>15</sup> Like other former objects of the Kunstkammer, it was later dis-



- 1 See Seelig 2008, p. 39–40.
- 2 See Beßler 2012, p. 34–5.
- 3 See Menzhausen 2017.
- 4 See Ledebur 1831, p. 13.
- 5 GStA PK, I. HA, Rep. 9, Allgemeine Verwaltung, Nr. D 2, Fasz. 1, fol. 186r–v; transcribed in Ledebur 1831, p. 53–4.
- 6 GStA PK, I. HA, Rep. 9, Allgemeine Verwaltung, Nr. D 2, Fasz. 1, fols. 177r–178v; transcribed in Ledebur 1831, pp. 52–3.
- 7 See Eingangsbuch 1688/1692b.
- 8 See Materialbuch Ungeltes, fols. 2r–3v and passim.
- 9 For a discussion of amber as an important economic factor in Brandenburg-Prussia, see Hinrichs 2007, pp. 14–40.
- 10 Bichi 1891, p. 27.
- 11 See Verzeichnis 1735; Verzeichnis Naturalien 1793.
- 12 Nicolai 1786a, p. 792.
- 13 Verzeichnis 1735, fol. 17v.
- 14 Küster 1756, p. 20.
- 15 On the painting, see Janssen 2015, pp. 62–5.

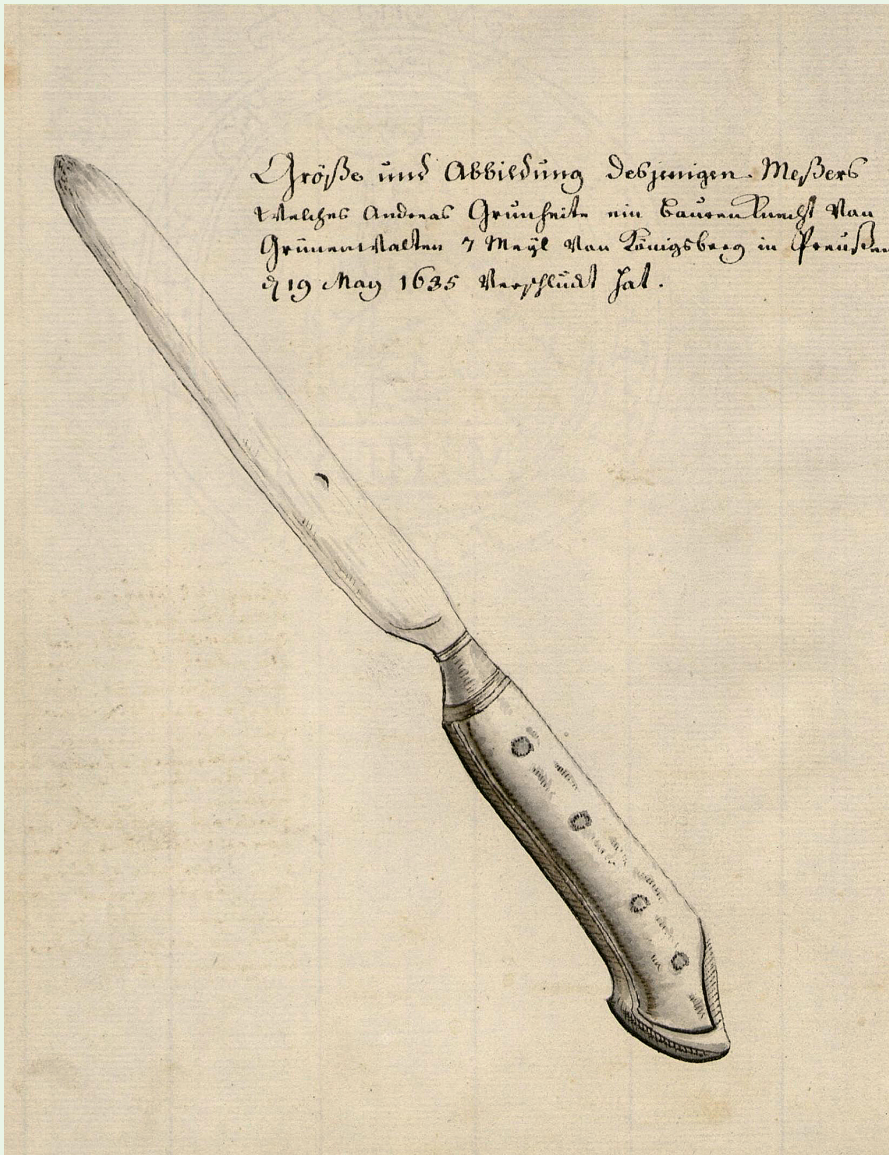
played in the gallery of the observatory at the Academy of Sciences.<sup>16</sup> SW/MK

### 3. Swallowed knife, sketch from the travel diary of Johann Andreas Silbermann, 1741

In the eighteenth century, one of the main attractions at the Berlin *Kunstammer* was a knife corroded by stomach acid [● Around 1740]. In 1692 it had been surgically removed from the stomach of the peasant boy Andreas Rudloff, who survived the procedure as the “Knife Swallower of Halle”. Earlier, in 1635, another knife

had been extracted from the stomach of the “Knife Swallower of Prussia”, Andreas Grünheide. The traveller Johann Andreas Silbermann attached a drawing of this earlier utensil to the notes he made during his visit to the *Kunstammer*. Both knives stood for special achievements in the history of surgery,<sup>17</sup> but the one from Halle belonged to a group of “curiosities” (most far more harmless than knives) whose importance was communicated through anecdotes and narratives on guided tours. In the organization of knowledge in the nineteenth century, such objects were presented as “historical curiosities of the fatherland” [■ Shattered Die]. MB

- 16 See Verzeichnis 1735, fol. 17v; A BBAW, PAW (1700–1811), I-XV-22, fol. 12r.
- 17 See Gruber 2005, esp. pp. 17–26, 29–35.
- 18 See Ledebur 1844, p. 23; Hildebrand/Theuerkauff 1981, pp. 113–14.



### 4. Georg Pfründt (or associates), ornamental vessel made from zebu horn, late seventeenth century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts

In the early modern period, objects made from rare materials sourced outside of Europe were especially popular among collectors, as they combined nature with art and the exotic with the local. In the nineteenth century, composite objects of ivory, nautilus, and rhinoceros horn were valued in the decorative arts movement because of the often sophisticated technical and artistic crafting of the original material by European goldsmiths and turners [■ Nautilus].

With its “African” allegories, this ornamental vessel, made of zebu horn, makes iconographic reference to the geographical origin of the material, whose context can no longer be reconstructed. Produced in southern Germany, it found its way into the *Kunstammer* in 1702 and has been held in the Museum of Decorative Arts since 1875.<sup>18</sup> SW



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5. Gottfried Leygebe, *The Great Elector as Saint George*, 1680, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Sculpture Collection and Museum of Byzantine Art

Some objects remained at the centre of attention for centuries, including this iron statuette of the Great Elector, which is found in almost all the known inventories [●1685/1688], guidebooks, and descriptions.<sup>19</sup> What makes the piece unusual is that the court sculptor and engraver Gottfried Leygebe fashioned it from single piece of iron. As a technical sensation, a detailed work of art, and an example of princely memorabilia, it possessed properties that never went out of fashion at the Berlin Kunstkammer. The sculpture is part of a series that includes *King Charles II of England as St. George*, currently held in the Green Vault.<sup>20</sup> SW



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6. Matthias Walbaum, *Diana and the Stag*, drinking game automaton, ca. 1600, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, automata were prized objects at the Kunstkammer, as they testified to humankind's godlike ability to set inanimate objects in motion [■Crab Automaton].<sup>21</sup> *Diana and the Stag* is a drinking game automaton propelled around the table by clockwork in its base. The person at whom it stopped was expected to remove the head of one of the figures and drink from the body. In the nineteenth century, such works were seen primarily as examples of artisanal craftwork or the art of goldsmithing. Many came from Augsburg.<sup>22</sup> SW

- 19 Inventar 1685/1688, fol. 85r; Inventar 1694, p. 232; Anonymus A, fol. 37v; Anonymus B, fol. 2r; Tschirnhaus 1727, p. 282; Hagelstange 1905, p. 208; Silbermann 1741, fol. 105v; Küster 1756, p. 19, cols. 547–50; Nicolai 1786a, p. 795; Henry 1805, p. 9; Kugler 1838, p. 246; Ledebur 1844, pp. 58–9; Schasler 1861, p. 218.
- 20 See Hildebrand/Theuerkauff 1981, pp. 136–7.
- 21 See Bredekamp 1995.
- 22 See the classifications in Kugler 1838, pp. 171–2; and Ledebur 1844, p. 58.
- 23 Eingangsbuch 1688/1692b, fol. 7v.
- 24 Inventar 1694, p. 141.
- 25 See China und Japan 1932, pp. 7, 9–19; Hildebrand/Theuerkauff 1981, p. 199.
- 26 See Kunstkammerinventar 1875, vol. 4, p. 38.
- 27 Eingangsbuch 1688/1692b, fol. 8v; Inventar 1694, p. 141. The repair is noted in Materialbuch Ungeltinger, fol. 3v.
- 28 Wassermann 1869, p. 31.
- 29 KGM 1887, p. 28.
- 30 Göres 1988, p. 133.



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7. Chinese porcelain goblet, early seventeenth century, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Asian Art

Between 1688 and 1689, Christoph Ungelter recorded the receipt of a Chinese porcelain goblet in the *Kunstammer's* register of new items.<sup>23</sup> He described it as a "rare openwork" vessel with "raised figures". At the time, such "white gold" was still monopolized by the Chinese. This did not change until the alchemist Johann Friedrich Böttger and the scientist Ehrenfried Walther von Tschirnhaus invented European porcelain. Two pieces of kaolin, used to make porcelain clay, are also recorded in the register.

The goblet was among the rarities and artworks listed in the 1694 inventory.<sup>24</sup> It did not attract renewed interest until the exhibitions of the twentieth century [■Nautilus].<sup>25</sup> SW

8. Fine octagonal tabletop, Italy (?), 1556, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum of Decorative Arts

With its Raphaelesque biblical scenes, this tabletop has a unique design. It initially served as a utilitarian object in the Berlin Palace and was reportedly even used as a school desk by Friedrich (III), the later electoral prince.<sup>26</sup> In 1689 it was moved from the library to the *Kunstammer*, where it was assigned to the art objects and rarities and its missing crystals were replaced.<sup>27</sup> It was eventually transferred to the Neues Museum and displayed in the majolica and glass section rather than with the so-called art furniture.<sup>28</sup> From 1875 to the end of the century, it was exhibited in a historically furnished room at the Museum of Decorative Arts.<sup>29</sup> Afterwards it was not shown until the 1988 exhibition *The Great Elector*.<sup>30</sup> Today the tabletop is considered one of the most important works in the museum. AT

Translated by Adam Blauhut



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